

1994

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### Recommended Citation

Narain, Denise deCaires and O'Callaghan, Evelyn, Anglophone Caribbean Women Writers., *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/109>

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### Abstract

'Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the "Realities" of Black Women'

11. I am grateful to the cultural researcher, Esi Sutherland - Addy, whom I interviewed, for this information on women's activities in the churches and as performers drawing on Ghanaian cultural traditions.
12. In Kenya, Muthoni Karega of Phoenix publishers, a participant, and Dr. Wanjiku Kabira of Nairobi University, organiser of the women's workshop, talked to me about its aims and the way it was conducted.
13. Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye: 'Mathenge,' *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English*, selected by A. Maja-Pearce (Heinemann, 1990), p. 19.

DENISE deCAIRES NARAIN and  
EVELYN O'CALLAGHAN

## Anglophone Caribbean Women Writers.

'Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the  
'Realities' of  
Black Women'

What they really want  
at times  
is a specimen  
whose heart is in the dust

A mother-of-sufferer  
trampled, oppressed (Grace Nichols)

Since women have been producing literature in the Caribbean for centuries, the 'emergence of the Caribbean woman's voice' has less to do with a sudden manifestation of talent than with the politics of publishing and the current 'marketability' of this writing. In the last two decades publishing houses in Britain and North America, no doubt influenced by the Women's Movement (and the relative increase in women's purchasing power) as well as growing interest in black and post-colonial literatures, have recognized both the existence and 'bankability' of women's writing from the Caribbean and have hurried to provide access to this writing via print. Sometimes, in the rush to catch this trend, material which needs further development and crafting has been published.

The very term 'Caribbean women's writing' is problematic, considering the diversity of the work and of the writers. Cynically, one could suggest that the collective label is a handy marketing device. A glance at the covers of a few recent anthologies of Caribbean women's poetry which feature the image of a strong, stoical, black woman, raise interesting questions in relation to the Caribbean woman. This image functions as visual short-hand for the archetypal, long-suffering, strong, black Caribbean matriarch

– a representation of the Caribbean woman which has circulated in regional literary texts from the very early days (witness Edith Clarke's/Lamming's much-quoted phrase, 'My mother who fathered me'). In these collections (*Jamaica Woman*, *Watchers and Seekers*, *Creation Fire*), the ethnic diversity of the contributors belies the representativeness of this image. This privileging of the black, working-class woman, while being 'politically correct' tends to homogenize writing by regional women, encouraging fixed agendas of appropriate subjects and setting limits on just who actually qualifies to be considered 'Caribbean'.

It raises the question, too, of the role played by various metropolitan feminist publishing houses in setting such limited parameters: are some black women's texts published as part of a 'numbers game' in which Western publishing houses seek to disprove the charge of Eurocentrism? The problem with this of course, is that in attempting to 'give' the 'Third World woman' a 'voice' and to celebrate it, critical questions about how/what this 'voice' is saying are seldom asked.

A related issue is the thorny question of quality, since volumes like *Creation Fire* include very finely crafted poems as well as several which require substantial editing; what the unevenness of the work included suggests is that simply naming one's experience and oppression as a Caribbean woman is enough to ensure publication. A willingness to raise uncomfortable critical questions is one of the refreshing features of another anthology, this time of Trinbagonian women, *Washer Woman Hangs Her Poems in the Sun*. Margaret Watts in her preface asks: 'Why women? Why these women poets? Why washerwoman?'; she then goes on to raise the issue of 'quality', to state just how Trinbagonian is being defined and to suggest why women are being anthologised separately. This kind of questioning is important in that it keeps the category 'Caribbean woman writer' in flux and reminds us that, to quote Grace Nichols, '...there ain't no easy-belly category/ for a black woman/ or a white woman...'

The editors of the two recently published prose anthologies, *Her True True Name* and *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam*, take pains to note the difficulty of balancing representationality and selectivity along with their underlying desire to publish as wide a sample of Caribbean women writers as constraints allow. In this 'overview' we would also stress the need to move away from totalising representations of Caribbean women's writing while at the same time asserting that it is politically expedient to consider women writers of the region in one category, given the fact that writing of the region has tended to be dominated by male writers which, in turn, has resulted in the circulation of limited/limiting representations of Caribbean women. What follows, then, is an outline of some of the thematic and formal similarities in the work of Caribbean women writers which link them under one 'label' – though we stress that this label must be flexible.

One of the narrative perspectives used by many of the prose writers is that of the girl-child/adolescent, often detailing the alienating nature of adult/child relationships: *Crick Crack Monkey* by Merle Hodge; *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid; a fair number of Olive Senior's short stories; and Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* are cases in point. More specifically, West Indian women writers focus on 'mothering' (by biological or non-biological mother figures). Their treatment of the mother is, more often than not, ambivalent; by contrast grandmothers feature much less problematically for the young protagonists. Among the poets, mothers and motherhood are also recurrent themes with Lorna Goodison's volume, *I Am Becoming My Mother* being the most sustained exploration. Her poem, 'For My Mother, May I Inherit Half Her Strength' is a powerful praisesong for the (stereotypical) strong black, Caribbean woman but it also painstakingly catalogues the cost of that stereotyping. In addition, connections between mother and 'motherland' are explored as the sense of 'home' and place are gendered in much of the writing.

Ambivalence informs the treatment of the journey to and the love/hate relationship with the 'Mother Country'. While authorial affirmation tends to be firmly behind the Caribbean as motherland, since many West Indian women writers now live away from 'home', either temporarily or permanently, the migration experience has consequently become an important theme in their writing. The novels of Jamaica Kincaid, Elean Thomas, Michele Cliff and Joan Riley all deal with opposing pulls of 'motherland' and 'Mother Country'.

This sense of 'unbelonging' and nostalgia for the Caribbean is also explored in the poetry of Grace Nichols, Amryl Johnson and, more recently, Merle Collins (all of whom are now based in Britain), and problematized in Joan Riley's *A Kindness To the Children* and Vernella Fuller's *Going back Home*. Perhaps more work needs to be done on the differences in representation of the Caribbean as 'home', in the texts of writers based in the region and those residing outside. Marlene Nourbese Philip, based in Canada, focuses on the issue of language and the lost/suppressed 'mothertongue' in her quest for a sense of cultural belonging. Philip explores the crucial role of patriarchal/colonial discourses in suppressing the mother tongue – associated, historically, in the Caribbean context with the suppression of African and Creole languages – and in *Looking For Livingstone* she 'reads' the silence 'beneath' the narratives of empire.

Discussions of poetry in the Caribbean have always tended to be dominated by the two male heavyweights, Brathwaite and Walcott (which poses role model problems for the would-be woman poet), but in much nationalist and 'protest' poetry the emphasis has been on the need for a vigorous and forceful (read, 'phallic') language with which to challenge the colonizer: as Bongo Jerry puts it, 'MAN must use MEN language/ to carry dis message.' The macho thrust of much nationalist poetry perhaps helps to account for the relative dearth of women poets in the early pre- and post-independence period. In the 1980s and 1990s women writers generally have asserted their ability to function as more than symbolic keepers of culture/nurturers of Creole and are experimenting with the Caribbean language continuum in interesting and innovative ways. Lorna Goodison, in her 'Heartease' poems, uses an impressively polyphonic voice, drawing on a range of discourses and seamlessly weaving linguistic registers (Jamaican Creole, Rasta idiom, Standard English, Biblical phraseology) in the 'body' of her texts to represent the body politic or 'the nation'.

Among the prose writers, language may not be as obvious an issue but experimentation is evident in the strategies used to render the authorial voice less authoritarian/more democratic; in Olive Senior's 'Ballad', Miss Rilla's story is narrated by Lenora, a young Creole speaker whose own story is told in the telling of Miss Rilla's and the process of story telling is itself also a focus of the text.

Brodber, Collins, Pollard and Senior also use a multiplicity of narrative voices within texts which eschew the hegemony of the omniscient narrator by articulating a variety of voices from the Creole community. The increasing number of female-authored short story collections should be noted too, since this form easily accommodates such a diversity of perspectives. Multiplicity of narrative voice facilitates the representation of a world of fluid boundaries (between self/other, living/dead, mad/sane, dream/reality). This refusal of closure, of boundaries, of single truths, now designated 'postmodernist', is notable in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and continues in the writing of Brodber, Kincaid and Nourbese Philip. Some of the most interesting writing by anglophone Caribbean women evidences a move away from linear, 'realistic' narrative and a willingness to challenge conventional generic boundaries.

This experimentation with language and 'voice' in Caribbean women's poetry and prose links into larger, thematic questions of (quests for) 'identity', a holistic sense of self, which have always been central to Caribbean literature. Obviously, they resurface in West Indian women's literary investigation of how sociopolitical hierarchies of race

and class, the legacy of slavery and colonialism, impact upon female protagonists. Grace Nichols's *i is a long memoried woman*, for example, is a sustained poetic mapping of the violently damaging effects of slavery on the contemporary black Caribbean woman's attempt to construct a relatively stable identity. Janice Shinebourne's *Timepiece*, Merle Collins's *Angel*, and *Beka Lamb* also demonstrate the ways in which socialization into gender roles are crucially informed by race and class expectations.

The conflicting demands of such socialization are often shown to be potentially damaging to female self-awareness, dividing instead of uniting women (Tia and Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example). The resulting isolation and alienation are taken further in texts like *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and *Beka Lamb* which offer studies of protagonists exhibiting severe 'ontological insecurity', resulting in nervous breakdown, 'madness' and self-destructive impulses.

Among the poets, Christine Craig's 'Crow Poem', Olive Senior's 'To the Madwoman in My Yard' and Jean Binta Breeze's poem, 'Riddym Ravings' all deal with the theme of women and 'madness'. Mahadai Das, an Indian-Guyanese poet, focuses on the exploration of psychic landscapes in her most recent volume, *Bones*, pointing an accusing finger both at limiting 'feminine' roles in causing fragmentation and dislocation of self, and at capitalist exploitation of the 'Third World Woman' which reduces the woman to body parts: hands and feet. Another 'version' of ontological insecurity may be read into the way the poets, moreso than the prose writers, often focus on the process of writing itself and express anxiety about their 'right' to write, so that the writing of poetry is associated with the delicate balancing skills of the trapeze artist, with pain (sometimes with the pain of childbirth), or with a sense of poetry as an invasion of their 'personhood'.

A frequent target in West Indian literature has been the alienating effects of colonial education, usually buttressed by the teachings of an authoritarian Christianity. Again, by foregrounding a female protagonist, women writers demonstrate how restrictive gender roles are enshrined in colonial ideology. Works like Michele Cliff's *No Telephone To Heaven*, Olive Senior's stories and her poem 'Colonial Girl's School', *Crick Crack Monkey* and *Annie John* dramatize how effectively this insidious conditioning operates. Furthermore, in these and other texts, older women *within* the community are indicted for their role in socializing girls to become 'young ladies'. This oppressive 'ladyhood' is associated with Christian and Victorian strictures as to respectability and morality with their attendant taboo on the expression of female sexuality. Many writers point to the association of sexuality with shame, defilement and the forced renunciation of childhood freedom (with its relative androgyny).

The women poets of the region are more explicit in treating the issue of female sexuality positively; Marlene Nourbese Philip and Grace Nichols, for example, suggest that the body and the erotic can be used as a source of power. Philip, uses female 'body language' to destabilize patriarchal discourses while Nichols attempts to reclaim and celebrate the woman's body, specifically the black woman's body, by offering alternative definitions of beauty to challenge dominant Eurocentric paradigms of femininity. Interestingly, this focus on the body (always a contested site in feminist analyses of patriarchy) has been instrumental in Nichols receiving sustained critical attention in Britain to the point where she is often perceived as the archetypal Caribbean *woman* poet.

Much of the writing is, implicitly or explicitly, committed to sociopolitical change; this also has implications for the critical reception of such texts in that we, as critics, may need to rethink the kind of criteria used in interpreting these texts so that we can attempt to factor in this issue of 'consciousness raising' in the literature by women of the region.

Appropriately, women writers challenge limited definitions of the Caribbean woman which operate in society but which have also circulated in male-authored texts (stereotypes such as strong matriarch, tragic mulatto, virgin or whore). Increasingly too, this challenge to stereotypical representations is coming from women writers from a variety of ethnic groups who have to date been either underrepresented or 'misrepresented'. Ramabai Espinet and Rajandaye Ramkissoon-Chen, for example, are two new poetic voices that attempt to portray Indian Caribbean experience from the *inside*, attending to the tensions between ethnic and gender roles. Mahadai Das's work (mentioned above) also contributes to complexifying the trite stereotype of the Indian woman in the Caribbean as 'passive'; so does Olive Senior's story, 'The Arrival of the Snake Woman'. The image of the 'white' woman as insipid, asexual 'mistress' is also interrogated in the writing of Michele Cliff and Pauline Melville, and a new interest is being taken in the white West Indian writer Phyllis Shand Allfrey, who (like Rhys, to some extent) has often been considered not 'Caribbean enough'.

The literature generally suggests authorial endorsement of relational interaction, especially in terms of mutual female support – although this is not to assert a facile affirmation of sisterhood – even as it depicts sterile and confrontational interpersonal situations, particularly between men and woman. Riley's *The Unbelonging* and Goodison's 'Ceremony For the Banishment of the King of Swords' are two extreme examples of the latter. To date, there have been few explicit portrayals of lesbianism apart from the poetry of Dionne Brand and sections of Nourbese Philip's *Looking For Livingstone*. However, many texts deal unselfconsciously with the physicality of women's relationships with each other – one thinks of the sensuous evocation of the mother-daughter ritual baths in *Annie John*.

West Indian fiction by women tends to emphasize affinity with natural landscape, which sustains (as in Brodber's *Myal*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Orchid House*) and can engender what Goodison calls 'Heartease'. For her, as for several other writers, the natural world is seen to provide access to the realm of the spirits, the magical, the supernatural, coexisting with the everyday without incongruity. Brodber's two novels, *Annie John*, several stories by Senior, Pollard and Adisa, as well as the work of Nourbese Philip, all demonstrate this juxtaposition.

This sense of rootedness informs the ease with which the writing manipulates the whole range of language registers, and confidently negotiates the supposed gap between oral and scribal forms. In the fiction, writers freely draw on such diverse features of orality as proverb, songs (of all provenance), folk and fairy tale, and Biblical rhetoric. In poetry, the most striking appropriation of the oral tradition has been manifested in 'dub poetry', as practised by male performers such as Mutabaruka, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mikey Smith. As Jean Binta Breeze points out, the form presents particular problems for the woman who attempts to enter this field, since female sexuality has not, until recently, been perceived as having a place in the identity of the 'radical dub poetry'. In fact, even in the revolutionary challenge which 'dub poetry' presents to the conventional hierarchy of literary discourses (which privileges poetry) the dominance of the male voice continues.

Merle Collins and Amryl Johnson, in their most recent collections of poetry, point to other possibilities for the incorporation of orality in the *sounding* of their poems; as with the fiction, the poetry utilises song, refrains from children's games and calypso rhythms, and in some cases is sung rather than simply read (indeed, Johnson's *Gorgons* was released on cassette prior to publication). Such poetry insists women *will* be seen and heard.

Finally, Caribbean women writers, in common with women writers worldwide, frequently use the autobiographical mode; however, 'confessional' or intimate narratives tend to be as much explorations of national and political as of personal concerns, as in



Elean Thomas: *The Last Room* (London: Virago, 1991).

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DONNA PALMATEER PENNEE

## Canadian Women's Literary Discourse in English, 1982-92

For those of us who take seriously the various and imbricated post-isms that underwrite and overdetermine our critical utterances, the task of writing literary history, even in as narrow a fragment as that demarcated by my title (and imposed by the word-limit of this forum), is both exciting and daunting. Competing claims and imperatives – to be as thorough as possible in coverage (and of what?) or to make strategic choices for the sake of a coherent narrative? to speak in lists or to historicize the scene(s) of writing? – mark my task in such ways as to signal at once the discursive richness and methodological fraughtness of contemporary literary critical gestures, the demands and rewards of an increasing attention to the multiple imbrications of the literary and the social (in their broadest senses). Committing the critical self to text and to limited text, is, for me, enormously difficult, and the difficulty is compounded by the object of this survey – the most explosive, prolific, and diverse decade in the history of women's writing in English in Canada.

My title signals a recognition that in Canadian literature in general, the distance between what we used to call the primary and secondary works, never very great even in the early history of CanLit, has diminished further in the last decade, not so much because of a belated (and misunderstood?) Barthesian sense of the death of the author (though the rise of the masculinist scriptor, especially in the Canadian West cannot be discounted), but in part because of the (at least) doubled position(ing) of so many of